

November 20<sup>th</sup>, 2022

## Luke 23:33-43 “Jesus, Remember Me”

Welcome to the last Sunday of our church year. It will be another six weeks before we start the *calendar* year, but we start the new *church* year next week with the first Sunday of Advent. For those of us who use the New Common Lectionary, that means this Sunday is “Christ the King Sunday.” Yeah? Says who? Well, in 1925, Pope Pius XI declared that on the Sunday before Advent, the church would observe the “Feast of Christ the King.” Wait, so if this is something that the Pope declared, then it must be a “Catholic thing,” right? Correct. Okay, if this is a “Catholic thing” why is it in the New Common Lectionary which, for the most part, is a “Protestant thing?” And furthermore, why does the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) observe this? Aren’t we a movement who started out as sort of an “anti-establishment church?” Yes. But remember, we were also founded as a *unity* movement. Barton Stone, the Campbells and other founders of our movement often said things like, “We are not the only Christians, we are Christians only” and “Unity is our polar star.” So whenever we can get on board with other churches who we agree with, we’re going to jump at the chance. Now, I could complicate things this morning by talking about how Pope Pius XI was in cahoots with the Italian dictator Benito Mussolini and that the Feast of Christ the King was their attempt to legitimize fascist regimes. But ... I’m not going to go there this morning. For now, let’s just say that the church found a way to redeem this sketchy observance and recognize its value. It’s not the first time in history that the church has turned lemons into lemonade, and it won’t be the last.

Some of you might also be asking, “Why are we reading about Good Friday on Thanksgiving Sunday?” This too is a good question. You all are on top of it this morning! Thank you. We will address that issue in more detail later, but the quick easy answer is “because that’s the reading the lectionary gives us.” And it makes sense because we’ve been hanging out in Luke’s gospel since September. It’s been quite a ride too. We started out with Jesus teaching his disciples some difficult

lessons about what it's like to be a part of God's reign. These teachings did not always bode well with the powers that be and Jesus eventually paid for this with his life. Today's scripture lesson takes place at the very end of Jesus' earthly ministry. Jesus entered Jerusalem for the last time and did what he could to prepare his disciples for his eventual trial and execution at the combined hands of Herod and Caesar who were both representatives of kings of the Earth. Part of Jesus' mission was to show the kings of the earth that the kingdom that's coming and almost here; the kingdom of God was going to be completely different. It would have different priorities, different values, and would lift up those who were considered the least important while at the same time bringing down those whose sense of self-importance kept others from experiencing the fullness of God's rewards. Jesus was hailed by many as the Messiah ... the one who would usher in this reign of God and be seated on the throne.

And yet here in Luke's gospel we find Jesus nailed to a cross in the company of other criminals who Rome considered enemies of the state. Pastor, did you just say, "In the company of *other* criminals? Are you implying that Jesus was a criminal?" Sort of. I say this because Jesus *was* guilty of the charges that were brought against him. If anyone had any doubt about why Jesus was being crucified, all they had to do is read the inscription etched on his cross – "This is the King of the Jews." This was, of course, Rome's way of mocking him. They didn't think he was the King of the Jews at all. That's what Herod was called, and even his title was a joke because Herod was just a puppet ruler for Caesar who, as everyone knew at the time, was the *real* ruler of the land. Even Herod whose family had re-built and re-modeled the Jewish temple had to bend the knee to Rome and confess that "Caesar is Lord." But yes, Jesus was guilty. Earlier in this chapter when the assembly of Chief Priests brought Jesus to the Roman Governor, Pontius Pilate, Luke writes,

They began to accuse him, saying, 'We found this man perverting our nation, forbidding us to pay taxes to the emperor, and saying

that he himself is the Messiah, a king.’ Then Pilate asked him, ‘Are you the king of the Jews?’ Jesus answered, ‘You say so.’

But what kind of king gets crucified on a cross alongside criminals on death row? A cross, I might add, that he had to carry himself. What kind of king gets mocked by soldiers who cast lots just to see who gets his clothes? Those are the questions we need to ask on this Sunday that is dedicated to “Christ the King.”

In Luke 4, right before Jesus started his public ministry, he was led into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit to be tempted by the devil. Now, for a king to go through a trial in the wilderness before taking the throne isn’t unusual. King Leonidas of the Greek City State Sparta, even though he was born of royal blood, had to go through the agoge – the rigorous training that Spartan soldiers endured - before he could take the throne. Jesus’ trial involved a series of temptations calling him to take action to save himself. “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become bread” and “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself from the pinnacle of the temple.” And here in Luke 23, at the end of his public ministry, he faces similar temptations. The religious leaders who brought the charges against Jesus said, “He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!” The soldiers who mocked him said, “If you are the King of the Jews save yourself!” One of the criminals whose cross was next to Jesus said, “Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!” Jesus already passed the devil’s test at the beginning of his ministry. Now, here at the end of his ministry, he is experiencing the practical application of the devil’s tests. “Save yourself if you are who you say you are.” And again, he refused, and he passed. And again Jesus’ imminent death demonstrates the contrast between the kingdoms of earth and the reign of God.

The kingdoms of the earth are all about, “*Save yourself.*” That’s the rational thing to do, right? It’s what our lizard brain tells us to do when we’re about to be run over by a bus. But there’s a difference between our God-given sense of self-preservation when our life is in imminent

danger and the schemes that we come up with to maintain our own comfort and privilege at the expense of others. The kingdom of God, on the other hand, is all about, “*Give of yourself.*” Not in a weird codependent way, but in a way that makes sure that everyone can share in God’s abundance.

The kingdoms of the earth are all about retribution. Strike first, show no mercy and let no crime go unpunished. Look at what they did to Jesus. They beat him, mocked him, and tried their best to humiliate him. But Jesus, who represented the kingdom of God said, “Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” Whereas the kingdoms of the earth are all about retribution, the reign of God is all about reconciliation. The kingdoms of the earth are prone to anger, vengeance and outrage. The kingdom of God values forbearance, patience, and empathy.

Let me tell you one of the reasons I’m not a big fan of social media. Or maybe I should say I’m not a fan of what social media has become. Because when social media made its debut in 2003, I jumped on board because I was able to connect with friends, family, colleagues, and classmates that I hadn’t seen in years. This was a blessing for Lori Mack, who the Elmira High School class of 1984 made the official convener of all future class reunions. The poor woman had a tough time keeping track of this relatively small group of 100 people who were scattered all over the world. She rounded most of us up on social media and was able to effectively plan our 20<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup> class reunions. It was good because we were all able to re-connect with old friends. We shared pictures and commented on how much our children looked or didn’t look like their parents. We were able to cheer each other on in our achievements and support each other through tough times. We traded jokes, stories, and funny cat videos. It was great! For a while at least.

But then the shadow side of social media crept in and it seemed that all standards for polite conversation, peaceful ways of handling conflict, basic manners, humility, and mature ways of accepting differences flew

out the window. Now social media is known for public squabbles, controversy, political posturing, bullying, shaming, and general immature behavior. I think social media has contributed to the coarsening of civil discourse for everyone. Even non-social media users. Social media has become just another tool for people to decide who is “in” and who is “out.” It has affected the way we govern ourselves and engage in public life. It has become a vehicle to spread conspiracies, lies and to entice people into outrage rather than create opportunities to find common ground. Forbearance, patience, and empathy no longer seem to be valued. It’s as if we found a way to make it clear that the kingdoms of the earth are indeed the dominant forces at work in the world and that the Kingdom of God is just an unachievable fantasy. Hi Facebook Live and YouTube people! I just wanted to take a break to say we love you and we appreciate you! There is still a good side to social media, and we’re happy you’re here. Hang in there! There is hope! Hit “like” on this video and if you’re on YouTube please subscribe to our channel! Now let’s get back to the scripture lesson.

According to our scripture lesson today, Jesus refused to let Rome crush the humanity *or* the divinity out of him. He remained faithful to God’s way of love and forgiveness up to the very end. Will we be as faithful? Are we even capable of being as faithful? Exactly what would it take for us to turn to violence and anger, vengeance, and outrage? A disappointing election? A canceled airline flight? Someone cutting us off in traffic? A botched up fast-food order? If Christ is king, there is no ethical or theological justification for not following his way of love and forgiveness. We are, after all, ambassadors for God’s reign on earth. As Christ’s followers, we are bearers of the divine standard. We are the ones who proclaim that Christ is King. And we are also the ones who bear the responsibility of living out Christ’s values.

With that, I think we can take a moment to give some credit and a shout-out to Pope Pius XI for instituting this observance. Definitely not for the reason *he* instituted it, but perhaps for the transition that we now have

between the end of the church year and Advent where we can prepare ourselves to receive the King of Kings who was born in a manger.